

Master filmmaker John Carpenter has given us such movie classics as Halloween, The Thing and Big Trouble In Little China. This month he turns Chevy Chase transparent in *Memoirs Of An Invisible Man*, which was all the excuse we needed to ask Lindy Humphris to look through Big John's memorable career...

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"I don't believe motion pictures are a medium of messages. Film, to me is a feeling medium. A film invites the audience to project, in the psychological sense - meaning that you simply invest into the screen your own feelings. If I'm telling a story, and I have a scene where a murderer is going to stalk someone, what I do is figure out how best to convey that experience to an audience - what technique will elicit the greatest emotional response." So speaks John Carpenter, one of today's most highly regarded filmmakers, whose inherent love of movies enables him to draw freely from the work of such idols as Hitchcock and Howard Hawks. But these influences have not hindered him in establishing a style of his own. Moving surely from ambitious home movies to student films to cheap independent productions and finally big budget Hollywood epics like this month's *Memoirs Of An Invisible Man*, Carpenter is easily one of the most talented of today's so-called movie brats.

The John Carpenter story starts in Carthage, New York, where he was born on January 16th, 1947. But he was mainly brought up in Bowling Green, Kentucky, where his father worked as a music professor. He first decided to become a film director in 1953 when his parents took him to a local movie theatre to see *It Came From Outer Space* in dazzling 3D. Later in life he commented: "It was almost a religious experience for me. I just couldn't believe it when that meteor blew up right in my face!"

At the age of 8 John began borrowing his dad's 8mm movie camera to start turning out his own fanciful science-fiction productions, which bore titles like *Gorgon*, *The Space Monster* and *Revenge of the Colossal Beasts*. The latter was the story of giant aliens who

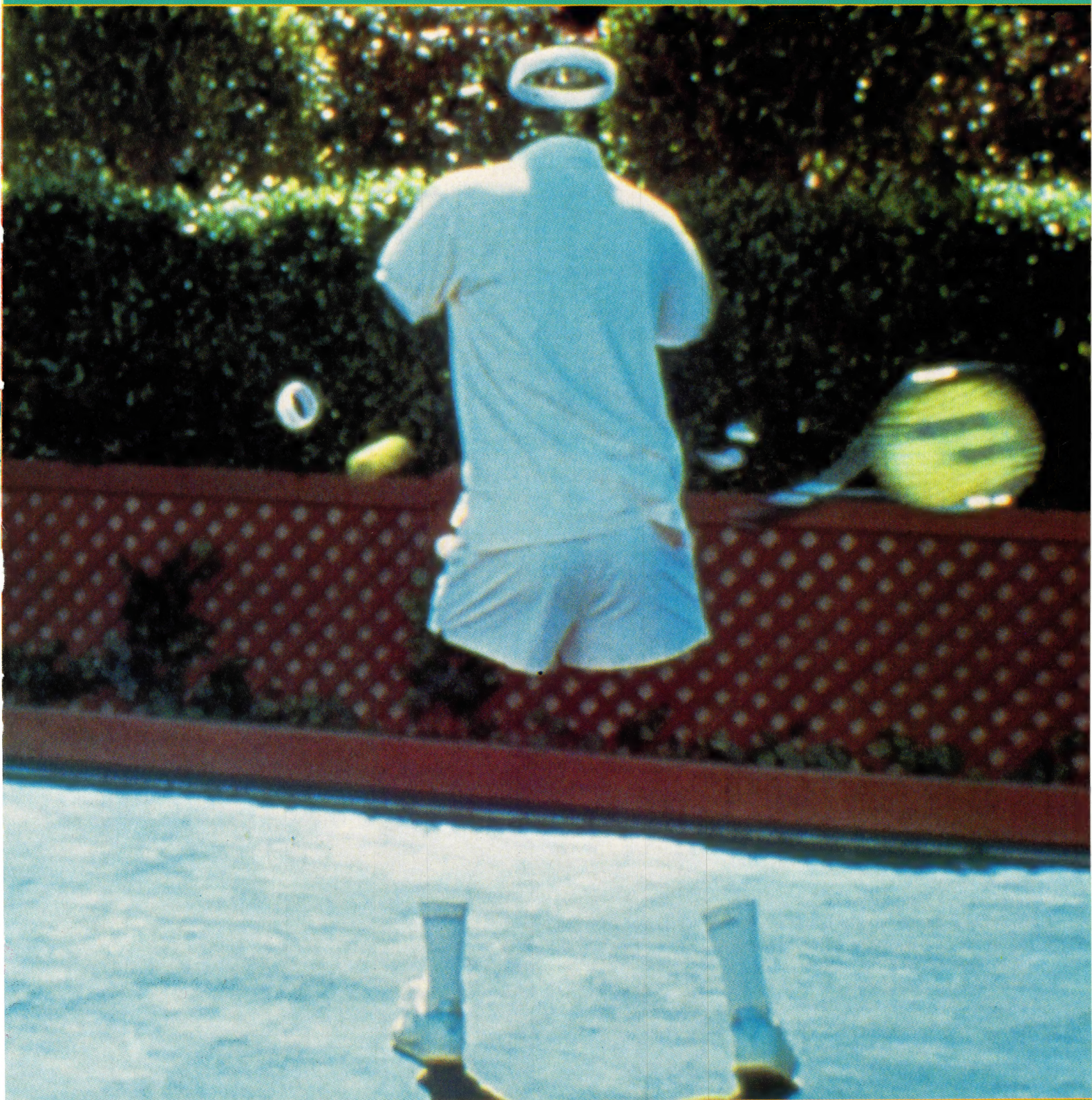
landed in spaceships to panic a small rural community, and it allowed Carpenter to experiment with perspective tricks and a *Twilight Zone* type trick ending.

Before he was 14 years old he had also filmed *Gorgo Vs Godzilla*, using animated clay figures, and *Terror From Space*, a sci-fi western in which cowboys shot it out with bug-eyed monsters. By this time he was using all his pocket money to buy film stock and had formed his own small company, Emerald Productions. Under this banner he turned out his most promising film to date: *The Warrior and the Demon*, a 40-minute epic involving Samson and the Barbarians and their battle against the evil Argyles, who have captured Samson's sorcerer ally. The high point of the film was a scene in which the demon of the title - a cross between a crab, spider and insect - destroyed the palace of the Argyles. Shots of it crashing through the palace gates and destroying the place were Carpenter's first successful attempts at stop motion animation, and afterwards he announced to a far from attentive world that Emerald Productions planned to "turn our attention to a full-length film which may be considered for theatrical release."

But the planned major feature didn't materialise, because hardly surprisingly the fifteen-year-old movie mogul could find no one willing to put up the cash for it. Instead he decided to publish his own fan magazine called *Fantastic Films Illustrated* in which he attempted to communicate with other amateur filmmakers across the country. Looking back on these auspicious beginnings nowadays, Carpenter observes: "My childhood was filled with the pulp and pablum of *Not Of This Earth* and *It Conquered The World*. The young eyes that watched the invisible *Id* creature



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of *Forbidden Planet* make its huge footprints in the sand of Altair IV and finally saw the thing fully illuminated in laser beams would never be the same." With very few opportunities to direct movies in Bowling Green, Kentucky, the movie-mad youngster persuaded his parents to let him move west and enroll in the film school at the University of Southern California. It was here that he worked on the Academy Award-winning short, *The Resurrection Of Bronco Billy*, the poignant tale of a young man unable to deal with the real world who takes refuge in Western fantasy. Thus, in his imagination the bustle of city traffic becomes a cattle drive, and a rival businessman becomes a menacing gunslinger. Carpenter wrote the music, edited, and shared writer/director's credit on this highly acclaimed work.

After *Billy* came *Dark Star*, a cracking little sci-fi picture about a bunch of spaced-out astronauts on an endless mission to seek out and destroy unstable stars. Shot on 16mm for the paltry sum of £3,000, this was, according to Carpenter: "An absurdist comedy, sort of like *Waiting For Godot* in outer space." The original version lasted 45 minutes, but after independent producer Jack Harris saw it, he was impressed enough to front up an additional £30,000 to expand it to feature length.

Dark Star did quite well at the boxoffice, but it hardly opened up a career for Carpenter in Hollywood. So after leaving USC he began to write screenplays, selling one called *Eyes* to Columbia that was later filmed as *The Eyes Of Laura Mars*, a chic exercise in sex and sadism that starred Faye Dunaway as a Helmut Newton-type fashion photographer who develops an

inexplicable psychic link with a killer which causes her to see the murders he is committing.

Other scripts that Carpenter worked on at this time included *Prey* - which was *Deliverance* with women - and *Better Late Than Never*, a black comedy about a group of old folks who steal a train. This was made into a lacklustre TV movie in 1979. He also wrote *The Philadelphia Experiment* and *Black Moon Rising*.

But screenwriting was not what Carpenter was really interested in. He wanted to direct movies, and in 1976 the chance came his way to do just that with the independently financed *Assault On Precinct 13*. Written and

directed by Carpenter, and also edited by him (under the pseudonym of John T. Chance, the name John Wayne took in one of Carpenter's favourite movies, *Rio Bravo*), the film was a tough urban thriller that actually reworked the scenario of Howard Hawks' *Rio Bravo* in a modern setting.

The simple story had a small group of lawmen defending a besieged police station on the outskirts of Los Angeles against a faceless horde of urban terrorists. There were lots of references to old movies, with a hero and heroine who acted just like Bogie and Bacall in *The Big Sleep*, but it didn't impede the powerful narrative flow of the film. And though the movie was obviously made on a shoestring, it delivered a potent blend of suspense, thrills, and humour, all souped up with the director's own sharp electronic score - a synthesised beat that pulsed the action along to its exciting conclusion.

Incredibly, *Assault* didn't go down at all well with American audiences. After a short release it just vanished from sight, leaving Carpenter to seek work in TV directing the Hitchcockian thriller *Someone Is Watching Me*. It was a well crafted suspense movie which introduced him to the actress Adrienne Barbeau. The couple were later married on New Year's Day 1979 (though they have since divorced) and walked down the aisle to the strains of Ennio Morricone's main theme from *Once Upon A Time In The West*...

Carpenter stayed with the small screen for *Elvis - The Movie*, a fairly conventional bio-pic featuring Kurt Russell (who was to become a great



personal pal) as the King of rock 'n' roll. This was a massive success at roughly the same time as English audiences discovered *Assault On Precinct 13*. "In England they seemed to fully understand what I was trying to achieve with the film," says Carpenter. And it was because of the director's new-found international reputation that producer Irwin Yablans offered Carpenter the chance to direct a low budget chiller called *The Babysitter Murders*. It was retitled *Halloween*, and under Carpenter's assured direction the film became the biggest independently financed horror hit in film history.

The original *Halloween* movie was of course followed by four further sequels, none of which were directed by Carpenter (though he did dabble in the scripts of the second and third installments). Instead he initially followed up the success of *Halloween* with *The Fog* (1979), a modest and occasionally effective terror tale about vengeful spirits haunting a coastal town, and *Escape From New York* (1981), a bigger budget science-fiction movie starring Elvis actor Kurt Russell as a tough cookie sent inside the walled future city of Manhattan to rescue the President of the USA (Donald Pleasence) from a bunch of misfit criminals. Carpenter's fluid direction combined with atmospheric sets and photography to make this one a box-office hit.

After that Carpenter embarked upon a remake of one of his favourite 1950s sci-fi movies, *The Thing*. Available on video from CIC, this features some truly amazing (and repulsive) special effects, and has come to be regarded as a modern day horror classic in its own right. Unfortunately for Carpenter, though, the film opened at the same time as Spielberg's phenomenally successful *ET*, and the audiences that flocked to enjoy the adventures of the cute and cuddly Spielberg star were repulsed by the nightmarish sights served up by Carpenter.

Undeterred, the director pressed on with *Christine*, the shivery tale of a car with a mind of its own. Based on a story by Stephen King, the movie had lots of shivery suspense, and some astoundingly good special effects - most noticeably in the scenes where *Christine* is shown to literally reconstruct herself from rusty junk to shining sleekness in full view of the camera!

Carpenter's next was *Starman*



(Columbia Tristar), a science fiction love story which had widowed Karen Allen helping alien visitor Jeff Bridges (who has taken on the form of her dead husband) return to his home planet. "It was a chance for me to do a \$25 million love story," says the director. "People don't offer me those sort of films very often, as it's not what they think I'm good at. I wanted to do *It Happened One Night* as a science fiction film about two people on the road across America. The last shot was really stunning - a close-up of Karen Allen's face, just like an old 1940s movie - I was very happy with that.

He was also very happy with *Big Trouble In Little China* (1986), a rousing Indiana Jones style adventure which came about after a pal of Carpenter's presented him with a stack of Chinese comic books full of people shooting lightning bolts at each other and flying around in the air. "What I was striving for was something different," explains the director, "something you have never seen before in an American film. It wasn't your straight Kung-Fu movie - it was really nuts!"

But though *Big Trouble In Little China* (Fox) was fun, it wasn't a big success with the public. Feeling that his film had been promoted wrongly, and generally dissatisfied with the compromises he was having to make within the studio system, Carpenter returned to the autonomy of independent, low-budget filmmaking for a pair of cheaply produced horror/science-fiction movies.

The first of these was *Prince Of Darkness* (Guild), starring Donald Pleasence as a priest fighting the very essence of evil. The screenplay was credited to a certain Martin Quatermass, obviously Carpenter himself acknowledging the script's debt to the classic Nigel Kneale Quatermass serials of the 50s. The other movie was *They Live* (Guild), a paranoid fantasy based on the idea that Yuppies are actually aliens from space. Once again this was let down by a weak script, though it was still quite a fun picture.

Carpenter returns to big budget studio pictures with his latest effort, *Memoirs Of An Invisible Man*, which is released by Warner this month. This \$30 million science-fiction comedy may suffer a bit from the identity crisis of not knowing whether it's a comedy or a serious sci-fi flick, but it is very sharply directed and features some fabulous invisibility effects.

The film's box-office failure has been a setback to Carpenter, but he has bounced back before and seems certain to do it again, this time with an expensive remake of the 50s monster favourite, *The Creature From The Black Lagoon*. It seems that the lad who once filmed model spaceships in his back garden has no worries about his future. "I have been very lucky with my dealings with Hollywood," he concludes. "Whereas a lot of talented people have vanished into obscurity, I am still around. All I care about is that I keep working. I'll be quite happy to go out directing..."